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Living Well

Chelsea Richmond, Family and Consumer Sciences Agent
K-State Research and Extension, Flint Hills District

Talking With Children About Violence And Tragedy

Shootings in schools, natural disasters, terrorist attacks—as adults we hope that these and other tragic events never happen anywhere, but definitely hope they will not affect the children and youth we care about. So what is a parent, teacher, or other caring adult to do when disasters fill the airwaves and the consciousness of society?

***Don't assume that kids don't know about it.** The reality of today's world is that news travels far and wide. Adults and children learn about disasters and tragedies shortly after they occur. Children and youth are exposed to the events as soon as they watch TV or interact with others who are consumers of the news. Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Children will likely be more worried if they think adults are too afraid to tell them what is happening.

***Be available and "askable."** Let kids know that it is okay to talk about the unpleasant events. Listen to what they think and feel. By listening you can find out if they have misunderstandings, and you can learn more about the support they need. You do not need to explain more than they are ready to hear, but be willing to answer their questions.

***Let children know that it is okay to feel upset.** Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Even anger is okay, but children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing these feeling appropriately.

***Share your feelings.** Tell young people if you feel afraid, angry, or frustrated. It can help them to know that others also are upset by the events. They might feel that only children are struggling. If you tell them about your feelings, you can also tell them about how you deal with the feelings. Be careful not to overwhelm them or expect them to find answers for you.

***Reassure young people and help them feel safe.** When tragic events occur, children may be afraid the same will happen to them. It is important to let them know that they are not at risk—if they are not. Try to be realistic as you reassure them, however. You can try to support them and protect them, but you cannot keep all bad things from happening to children. You can always tell them that you love them, though. You can say that, no matter what happens, your love will be with them. That is realistic, and often that is all the children need to feel better.

Help children and youth find a course of action. One important way to reduce stress is to take action. This is true for both adults and children. The action may be very simple or more complex. Children may want to write a letter to someone about their feelings, get involved in an organization committed to preventing events like the one they are dealing with, or send money to help victims or interventionists. Let the young people help to identify the action of choice. They may have wonderful ideas.

For more information, contact the Flint Hills Extension District Office in Council Grove at (620) 767-5136 or the office in Cottonwood Falls at (620) 273-6491.